

The Concept of Womanhood: Revisiting the Precolonial Nigerian Woman

Mfon U. Ekpootu

Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, University of Port Harcourt,

Rivers State, Nigeria

Abstract: Womanhood is a concept that has attracted an intensive scholarly gaze spanning multiple disciplines. The focus here is on womanhood as imagined, and demonstrated in the Nigerian milieu. In different historical epochs from pre-colonial to post-colonial Nigeria, the production of knowledge about women was and continues to be essentialized, contested and negotiated. It is the aim of this paper to show the problematic ‘woman’ in pre-colonial Nigerian society. The dictionary definition of womanhood describes it as “a state or condition of being a woman”. The question this begs is what does it mean to be a woman? Do women have a commonality as observed in the case of people of the same race? Efforts to answer this question throw up the definitional murkiness of the ‘woman space’. The complexity of the category “woman” is seen in the different meanings attached to it historically, from the philosophical constructions of the woman in classical antiquity as an ‘underdeveloped man’; to the Victorian woman as ‘the angel in the house’, the domesticated wife; the colonized woman as hapless victim in need of saving and the postcolonial narrative of womanhood as one of difference in performance. Given that womanhood as a performative act is context specific, this paper revisits the precolonial Nigerian woman, in her complexity and knowledge production. The work adopts intersectionality as its theoretical framework to understand the crisscrossing of social, and political identities, roles and duties of women in pre-colonial Nigeria and how they experienced being a woman from different positions of power and social status. The paper contributes to the literature on African women.

Keywords: Woman, Womanhood, Motherhood, Empowerment, Precolonial Nigeria.

Introduction

This paper makes no pretension to a comprehensive coverage of the subject matter. Womanhood is a concept that has attracted an intensive scholarly gaze spanning multiple disciplines including Gender Studies, Psychology, Literary Studies, History, Law, International Relations, Arts and Philosophy. The focus here is on womanhood as imagined, and demonstrated in the Nigerian sphere. In different historical epochs from pre-colonial to post-colonial Nigeria, the production of knowledge about women was and continues to be essentialized, contested and renegotiated. It is the aim of this paper to investigate the problematic “woman” in pre-colonial Nigerian society. A good starting point is deciphering what womanhood means. The dictionary definition of womanhood describes it as “a state or condition of being a woman”. The question this begs is what does it mean to be a woman? Do women have a commonality as often observed in the case of race? Efforts to answer this question throw up the definitional murkiness of the ‘woman space’. The complexity of the category woman is seen in the different meanings attached to it historically, from the philosophical constructions of a woman in classical antiquity as an ‘underdeveloped man’; to the Victorian woman as “the angel in the house”, the domesticated wife; the colonized woman as hapless victim in need of saving and the postcolonial narrative of womanhood as one of difference in performance and more recently its space made even more

slippery with the presence of trans women

The centrality of the female body to feminist debates makes an analysis of feminist thoughts important in any examination of womanhood. Feminist movements and attendant scholarship has been instrumental to global attention to issues related to women and remain an important source of knowledge production on women not just in the Western world but in Africa and Nigeria. Feminist movements across the ages from the early agitations in the late nineteenth century to the second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s defined the female in accordance with the socio-political considerations of the time. The inability of the feminist movements of the nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries to speak to the social realities of non-white middle-class women led to criticisms of essentialism. The Black feminist scholar Bell Hooks (1981, p. 1984) refuted the notion engrained in the feminist movement that women share a commonality in their oppression because attention to ‘political concerns of leisure-class white housewives...were not the political concerns of masses of women’ Womanhood, therefore, is experienced differently. Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949) made an argument for the social construction of gender when she states that ‘one is not born a woman but become one.’

In the twenty-first century, the term woman and demonstrations of womanhood have become even more slippery with the growing visibility of trans women, lesbians and bisexuals raising questions on what it means to be a woman and whether female-specific body parts or bodily functions can be used to define womanhood. Chimamanda Adichie the celebrated Nigerian writer and an influential voice on gender rights, caused an international uproar when she said in a March 2017 interview on Britain’s Channel 4 News that trans women were trans women and cannot be said to share the same experience with biological women because:

they are people who, having been born male, benefitted from the privileges that the world affords men and...we should not say the experience of women born female is the same as the experience of trans women.

Adichie maintains that acknowledging differences in experiences of womanhood does not mean being less supportive or elevating one over the other otherwise one runs the risk of gender as essentialist. The need to articulate the fight for African women’s rights in their own terms and speak to the social, cultural, political, religious and economic reality of African women has led to the growth of African feminism. It rejects representations of African women as ‘poor and oppressed by Western feminists and lacking the capacity to fight their own battles (Nnaemeka, 2005; Okome, 1999). An overriding theme in the production of *The African Woman* is motherhood. The ideal African woman is a good wife and mother, humble and respectful. This emphasis on motherhood marks the difference between the Western feminist perception of womanhood and African feminists’ womanist perception (Oloruntoba-Oju and Oloruntoba-Oju, 2013).

Given that womanhood as a performative act is context specific, this paper revisits the precolonial Nigerian woman, in her complexity and knowledge production. African womanhood is a site of contestation, a ‘battlefield where issues of modernization tradition change and personal identity were fought’ (Kanogo, 2007). With the exemption of the introduction and conclusion, the paper is divided into five parts, namely; The concept of womanhood, The idea of womanhood as motherhood, Womanhood: An Account of the pre-colonial Nigerian experience, The pre-colonial Nigerian woman space as empowering, and finally, Re-reading the empowered female space in precolonial Nigeria. The first subsection seeks to understand womanhood as a concept. The second deals with the investigation of the relationship between womanhood and motherhood. The Pre-colonial conceptions of ideal womanhood are looked into with an analysis of the debate on the power and authority of women in the third subsection. The fourth subsection deals with the narrative of the precolonial woman space as empowering. Finally, the last section looks at sites of knowledge production on what constitutes a woman. Who had/has the power to define, and in producing this category, which roles, and behaviours were/are regarded as deviant, unnatural and dangerous? (Sikoki, 2014)

The theoretical framework adopted in the work is intersectionality. Intersectionality is a coinage of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). As a theoretical framework, intersectionality acknowledges that across different international contexts, disciplinary approaches and theoretical perspectives, authors speak to the current absences and even problems of intersectional analyses in re-considering this as a useful paradigm in sexualities studies, hoping to avoid simple insertion and repetition (Taylor et al. 2010, p. 2). As an analytical framework, intersectionality enhances our investigation of Nigerian women's diverse social, economic, religious and political identities that often combine to create the different modes of discrimination faced and privilege enjoyed by Nigerian women.

The Nigerian woman experiences being a woman from different positions of power. As a woman, the researcher herself demonstrates womanhood not just as a woman, but as an Annang woman of a minority ethnic group in the Akwa Ibom State of Southern Nigeria; as an educated woman and in other not readily visibly ways. Her perspective, embodiments of power and powerlessness are influenced by her positionality. It is this differential positioning in relations of power which impacts Nigerian women's experiences that lends value to the theoretical framework adopted.

The Concept of Womanhood

Like most concepts or ideas, the concept of womanhood has been essentialized, redefined and challenged. Owing largely to the patriarchal configuration of most societies, the idea of womanhood has often been defined by men thereby laying grounds for the duties, roles and expectations of women without the input of women. Who is a woman? How has womanhood been defined? Also, taking into consideration the numerous advances made in gender studies, how should womanhood be defined particularly as a performative activity by women of diverse backgrounds and not as a rigid and essentialized patriarchal or social construct? Gender is socially constructed, and how women conceptualize their own gender is shaped by numerous factors, such as gender-role socialization, interpersonal interactions, media messages, and personal experiences as women (e.g., Abrams, 2003; Baker, 2005; Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2003; Witt, 1997). Some of these external forces and personal experiences may create similar perceptions of gender for women of different backgrounds (Settles et al 2008, p. 454).

In order to understand the concept of womanhood, we would have to proceed with the pertinent question: *who is a woman?* Apparently, at least biologically it seems an easy task to differentiate a woman from a man. However, in the wake of the concept of gender fluidity and other challenges or advocacies for gender reassignment, a clear-cut definition of a woman has become a sensitive if not offensive matter for some persons. In addition, Infants usually begin life without awareness of self as a separate entity but only gradually acquire the experience necessary to *hatch* in the psychological sense (Roger 1978, p. 203). Theologically, specifically within the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is strongly believed that God created human beings as male and female in his image. The text as contended in the bible reads; "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27) What then makes a woman a woman and who defines or how is such *womanness* defined?

Like Iona Cleave rightly pointed out, "When faced with the question 'What does being a woman mean to you?' there are about a million answers, and every day, the answer changes" (Cleave as cited in Hughes and Mastantuono 2020). Thus, she proceeds to further state the convolutions and some of the dynamics of being a woman from her perspective.

Being a 'woman' is multifaceted, complex, and often unfair. It's a difficult gender to identify with. Society holds us to ridiculous standards, outdated gender norms are pervasive in our daily lives, gender pay gaps are still rampant, and the patriarchy, although facing criticism, is still a force to be reckoned with. Often, I find myself frustrated and angered at the situations that still

confront us (Cleave as cited in Hughes and Mastantuono 2020).

Commenting on the peculiarity of women's situation, Martha L. Rogers noted that "significant numbers of women in our culture are currently being confronted with internal and external pressures to change or to remain the same in the roles and lifestyles they have assumed" (Rogers 1978, p. 2020).

In his essay entitled *The Subjection of Women* (1861), John Stuart Mill vehemently challenged what he considered the patriarchal foundation of Victorian society, particularly with regard to the subordination of women as not only wrong but as a major cause of hindrances to human improvement and thereby demanding its replacement with the principle of perfect equality that admits neither power nor privilege on the one hand, nor disability on the other. On the question of what constitutes the difference between both sexes, Mill is of the opinion that it is a difficult question to respond to on grounds that "what is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing-the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others" (Mill as cited in Russett 1989, pp. 1-2). In fact, Mill subscribed to the position that nurture rather than nature shapes character and differences in gender. History he argued, displays "the extraordinary susceptibility of human nature to external influences, and the extreme variableness of those of its manifestations which are supposed to be most universal and uniform." (Mill as cited in Russett 1989, p. 2). This, therefore, led Mill to the submission that if there actually exist any differences between both sexes it could only be adjudged natural if they could not possibly be artificial, that is the effects of education or external circumstances. The position of Mill notably takes cognizance of the social facets of the sexes as enculturated beings. However, it fails to mention or take recognition of the biological differences as constituting grounds for the differences in sexes and the basis upon which womanhood can be conceptualized.

Prior to the middle of the nineteenth century, questions pertaining to the concept of womanhood or manhood for that matter were often issues raised in the domain of theology, folklore and philosophy. For Instance, it is common knowledge that Aristotle maintained the position that the female sex was a manifestation of deformity in nature and proceeded to offer what will now be reasonably considered an unscientific explanation for his claim (Russett 1989, p. 3). Hegel, Kant and Fichte held similar conception of women which can in summary be expressed thus;

- 1. The woman's body is frail, made for reproduction and for use by man; woman must be passive and receptive. As a consequence, only man can legitimately pursue sexual pleasure.***
- 2. The woman's limited intellectual abilities prevent her from achieving in the fields of science and art or fully understanding them. As a consequence, there is no point sending a girl to school or university.***
- 3. Woman's general passive character and lack of intellectual abilities forbid her from having an active role in the outside world. She cannot work or be politically active. She has no legal autonomy and is represented by her father or husband. (Deranty 2000, p. 202).***

This kind of positions has been commonly held among some scholars who see women with their "less vigorous intellect, with their limitations to the realm of the visual world not the fanciful, and as procreative beings that should stay at home and raise children" (Hillesheim & Shykoff 1991, p. 12). As aptly put by Hillesheim & Shykoff, "Men produced, women reproduced."

Femininity is a critical concept often used interchangeably with womanhood. It is considered the definitive hallmark of what it entails to be a woman as opposed to masculinity. In her *Fascinating Womanhood* (1990), Helen Andelin defines femininity thus;

Femininity is a gentle, tender quality found in a woman's appearance, manner, and nature. A feminine woman gives the impression of softness and delicateness. She has a spirit of sweet submission and a dependency upon men

for their care and protection. Nothing about her appears masculine—no male aggressiveness, competence, efficiency, fearlessness, strength, or the ability to kill her own snakes (Andelin 1990, p. 338).

Andelin proceeds to characterize a feminine woman as one who is naturally oriented towards her womanhood. One who is proud to be a woman and “happy to fill her destiny as a wife and mother, anxious to make a happy home for her loved ones. Her career is a career in the home. Her occupation is to live her daily life. Her glory is the esteem of her husband and the happiness of her children” (Andelin 1990, p. 338).

There is an underlying tendency that is observable in all of these conceptualizations of womanhood, in spite of the difference, that tie the idea of being a woman to certain essences as fundamental, unchanging and even nonnegotiable. Tracing the literature reviewed here, from John Stuart Mill to Helen Andelin, we can easily notice the several attempts at essentializing womanhood. It is this very attempt at essentializing womanhood that this we intend to challenge by employing the intersectional/intersectionality theoretical frame.

The Idea of Womanhood as Motherhood

Motherhood has been another essentialist feature or definitive hallmark of womanhood. In fact, in certain quarters, it is unfathomable to think of the two as exclusive identities that it is sometimes often believed that the self-actualization of woman lies in the attainment of motherhood. Therefore, there is often a prevailing stereotype about women who have come of age and either by choice or circumstances beyond the control are neither married nor mothers, this is common in our clime. Describing this phenomenon, Jeri Muchura who strongly believes that womanhood should be a multifaceted experience stated that;

When it comes to motherhood, women are often put on pedestals as if they come pre-installed with a chip or software called motherhood. Society seemingly believes that just because a woman has given birth, she automatically feels complete and experiences never-ending happiness. The worst thing she can do is mention any other emotions like being upset, unprepared, regret or even overwhelmed (Jeri Muchura as cited in Awuor 2021).

What exactly is motherhood? How or why is it often part of the essentialist definition and expectation of womanhood? Differentiating between *mothering* on the one hand and *motherhood* on the other hand, Tina Miller states that motherhood refers to “the context in which mothering takes place and is experienced” while she defines mothering as “the personal, individual experiences that women have in meeting the needs of and being responsible for their dependent children” (Miller 2005, p. 3). As in many societies, the institution of motherhood is often conditioned by social, cultural, historical, political and also, moral factors. This in turn fundamentally shapes the experiences of women in the decision of whether or not to become mothers due to the cultural expectation or assumptions related to women’s desire to be mothers. Miller believes that these assumptions “also makes it hard to talk about unexpected and/or difficult aspects of new mothering, leading us to conceal what are normal experiences and reactions, and so perpetuates the old myths of motherhood” (Miller 2005, p. 3).

With the increasing involvement of women in the labour market, certain dilemma especially one between career and motherhood began to surface. While the identification of womanhood with motherhood could be traced back to the early beginnings of human history the idea of motherhood as posing a dilemma can be traced to the increasing participation of women in the labour market. Ann Taylor Allen commenting on this pointed out that “only since the turn of the twentieth century has freely chosen motherhood been perceived as a realistic— though still often unattainable—aspiration. But the choice is too often between motherhood and other forms of self-realization (Allen 2005, p. 1). Furthermore, highlighting the socially constructed nexus between womanhood and motherhood, Allen stated that;

Women still assume the chief responsibility for the family, and do most of the

work of reproduction and child-rearing. This “double burden” restricts their participation in economic, social, and cultural life and is now the major source of gender inequality in Western societies. Of course, many women never have children, but the tendency to identify womanhood with motherhood nonetheless shapes the environment in which they live and work (Allen 2005, p. 1).

Womanhood: An Account of the Pre-colonial Nigerian Experience

What it means to be a woman in today's Nigeria is shaped historically, controlled and regulated by a panoply of factors. The response of women to such regulating mechanisms also differs through the years, demonstrating the complexity of woman as a group and their mutability in time and space. Inadequate attention to such changes in constructs can potentially oversimplify and distort the complexity of *doing woman* (not being). In the precolonial Nigerian society, performance of gender begins from childbirth with questions asked of the sex of the child by family and friends. Very often, the male child elicits great joy as one who will preserve and extend the family name and lineage. Gender performance continues in the socialization of the female child. It is seen in the freedom allowed the boy and the overt *control* the girl is subjected to; in her domestication; and in her grooming on how to make a good wife (Dogo, 2014, p. 265). This construction of gender roles is likened by Sylvia Tamale (2014) to the body as a blank slate upon which culture inscribes “rules, images, symbols, and even hierarchies that give shape and character to that body”. At the same time, it is also recognized that inscriptions of cultural texts on female bodies are mediated by age, class, ethnicity and religion and thus womanhood can be experienced differently across geographical space in spite of certain underpinning commonalities (Okome, 1999).

Cultural framings in the pre-colonial era linked women to motherhood. A woman was primarily regarded as a reproductive body. As an incubator that births life, thus, a mother was sacred and worshipped. Motherhood remains the most celebrated function of the female body, glorified as the true function of a woman. Writing on this motherhood/womanhood link, Hill argues that motherhood “provides a respectable social identity...and a space where authority, a sense of control, and self-expression can be cultivated” (Hill, 2005 as cited in Chaney, 2011, p. 515). In the Nigerian context, this reverence for motherhood can be teased out from folklores, proverbs, names, mythological and religious beliefs. For instance, in the Yoruba tradition, such proverbs are “mother is gold, father is mirror”. Mother as gold symbolizes precious possession and father as mirror signifies symbol of identity (Makinde 2006, p. 146). The *Gelede* ritual performance predominant in Western Yorubaland is another example of the importance of motherhood. *Gelede* celebrates the mystic power of the ancient mother, which can be both destructive and life-giving (Drewal, 1977, 1983; Makinde, 2004). This is done in colorful masquerade celebrations honoring female ancestors and deities as well as female elders who are believed to possess secret knowledge and power by virtue of their long years. *Gelede* not only pays tribute to women but also draws societal attention to the need for equitable gender relations as a prerequisite for social organization and development.

Also, among the Igbos, the reverence for motherhood is captured in names like *Nneka* meaning Mother is supreme. Other examples are *Nnekachi*, meaning Mother is greater than Chi and *Nnebuchi* - Mother is Chi. Egejuru explains that in Igboland, Chi is believed to be a person's creative force, directing the course of one's life. However, a chi is known to depart from a person who engages in acts not sanctioned by his/her chi (Egejuru, 1997, p. 13). The author notes that the reproductive capacity of a mother to create life makes her a creator like a chi. A mother can also be greater than chi in the sense of the permanence and reliability of motherhood who is believed to remain steadfast unlike a person's chi, which can depart. This is exemplified in the case of the character Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

Eka in Ibibio language means mother. The sacredness of motherhood among the Ibibios is illustrated in the use of the mother concept *eka* to name the most powerful masks of traditional cults in the land - *eka ekpo*, *eka abasi*, *eka ekong*, and *eka idung* (Ekpo 2011,p. 90). The

matriarchal domination of such important policy-making traditional societies as mentioned above has also been alluded to by Talbot (1914 as cited in Ekpo, 2011). In Northern Nigeria, the Islamic rule that “Paradise lies at the feet of mothers” is indicative of the primacy of motherhood (Zakaria, 2001, p. 110). Motherhood was and continues to be seen as a qualifying feature of womanhood, adding dignity to the woman in society. Hence in the pre-colonial era, marriage was engaged in more for procreation than sexual desire.

The Pre-colonial Nigerian Women Space as Empowering

Women are confronted daily; by their own urges to fulfill their potentials, by counter demands from their families and societies to conform to traditional female roles, and also by pressures exerted by the women's movement to recognize a variety of possibilities that females can create for themselves. “These pressures are found by more than a few women to be very threatening. To the extent that the source of the threat is perceived as external to themselves, it may often be dealt with by environmental manipulations to reduce the stress” (Rogers 1978, p. 204).

Perceptions of the African woman has been deeply impacted upon by what Sandra E. Greene describes as “racial stigmas imposed on Africans since the eighteenth century. Such racial stigmas according to the author denigrate African women as savages in need of civilization; victims of an oppressive social hierarchy and lacking voice (1999, p. 17). Over the years there has been copious literature by African female writers on women in pre-colonial African societies. Here, we are predominantly focused on problematizing negative western discourse on Nigerian/African women as victims of oppression without a voice.

In Nigeria, these writers seek to debunk such claims and recover female agency in Nigerian history, pointing out the need to study African women not from Western epistemology and theory but within the Nigerian/African socio-cultural milieu. Historically, Nigerian women were shown to occupy positions of power and authority in the spiritual, political and economic life of society. A famous example of such project is Oyeronke Oyewumi's seminal work on the Yorubas, *The Invention of Woman: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourse* (1997). She argues that contrary to Western narrative of gender as a form of classification and the African woman's subordinate position in the gender hierarchy, there was no gender in Yoruba thought and social ordering. It was a colonial construct. Rather in pre-colonial Yorubaland, social organization was based on seniority with implications for a more female-friendly social order and a complementarity of social relations. Other writers like Adeniran and Ogen (2011) and Makinde (2004) have also alluded to an enhanced female space with power and authority complementary to men. This is also reported of in the pre-Islamic Hausa land especially in the peripheral city states

The *Ifa* verses is an important historical document from which one can distill the importance of women. Olasupo, Kikelomo and Adeniran draw upon these in their study to argue that while “Yoruba proverbs recognize the natural dichotomy in sex, it does not always recognize the extension of these to other social roles” (2012: 11). They point to two *Ifa* verses- *Ogbe-Wate* and *Osa-Guda*, which speak of the complementary roles of men and women. It is these cosmological myths of binaries yet allowing for interdependence that informs social organization and its impact on gender relations (Olajubu, 2008:317). The annals of Yorubaland are replete with powerful women in different areas of life such as Queen mothers, deities, priestesses, economic leaders and founders of settlements (Makinde, 2004; Afolayan, 2011; Adeniran and Ogen, 2011). The female power is strongly felt in Yoruba theories of origin and in the eastern part of Yorubaland land, the heroic founder of Ile-Ife, the cradle of the Yorubas, is believed to be female (Mathews, 2014; Afolayan, 2011). In other places like Igbomima-Yoruba, women are celebrated with the *Imarugbo* (honoring the elderly woman), festival. This is an annual ritual to memorialize women's important role in the history of Ila city in Igbomima and her importance as a mother in protecting the royal lineage (Afolayan, 2011:142). In the economic sphere, women were renowned as *Iyalode* (women leaders) and *Iyalage* (market women leader). Female power is also seen in the number of female deities and goddesses. Examples include *Aje-orisha*

(deity) of wealth; *Osun*, *orisha* of love, fertility, wealth and harmony. Osun's fame and power extend to Yoruba speaking parts of Africa and the Diaspora. Others include *Oba*, *orisha* of marriage and *Yemoja*, mother goddess of love. These deities also had women as priestesses for example *Iya Osun*, *Iya Ogun* and *Iya Sngo* (Kanu, Omojola and Bazza 2020, pp. 124-125).

Further South, among the Igbos, the Ibibios and Annang, gender differentiation was critical in social relations. *Iban Isong* (meaning women of the land) in Ibibioland was the women's traditional government and the organization could be said to be the umbrella organization that housed other groups. The nucleus of *Iban Isong* was *Ekpa Iban Isong*. *Ekpa* here means core. Thus *ekpa Iban Isong* was the core of the *Iban Isong* group. Membership of this group was selective and the women were feared and revered in society because of the power they wielded (Abaraonye, 1997). In Delta State, Ogbomo and Ogbomo's (1993) study of women in Iyede, show that women rose to positions of power especially in the economic sector. Similar to Madam Tinubu of Lagos, women like Madam Odubu Eridi Ovie and Madam Etsasuekhoa gained prominence through trade. Madam Ovie is reputed to have had both men and women working for her. Etsasuekho was wealthy enough to pay off a debt Iyede owed another community. In Southeastern Nigeria, Igbo women are said to have enjoyed some level of influence and impacted community decisions through women groups. The exercise of authority as explained by Samatha Kies was within the woman space and both genders understood their differentiated roles, which was complementary (Kies 2013, p. 22).

Re-Reading the Empowered Female Space in Pre-Colonial Nigeria

From the literature, the dominant theme in portrayals of women during this era was one of complementarity to men, women enjoying privileged roles in the economic, political and spiritual life of the people. Could we then say that womanhood was an empowered space in pre-colonial Nigerian society? And if it was, was it the reality for all women? Or have African female writers in the attempt to establish the agency of women in African history constructed their own notion of womanhood? Studies on Nigerian women in the pre-colonial era almost falls into the trap of perceiving women of this era in a relatively undifferentiated way, especially with the trope of gender complementarity in the social order. The idea of a gender-neutral pre-colonial Yoruba society has been challenged by scholars like Tolu Pearce (2014), and Bibi Bakare (2004). Pearce questions the notion of gender equality with the example of Iya-Oko-mother-in-law and other female relatives of a woman's husband. The concept of Iya-Oko for the author presupposes the existence of a gender category. The power and authority accorded the position of Iya-Oko are enabled and given legitimacy by a gendered framework (Pearce 2014, p. 321). Bakare critiques Oyewumi for her failure to incorporate the interdependency of various forms of power in her examination of seniority as a social organizing principle in traditional Yoruba societies. In other words, seniority as a power relation does not operate in a vacuum but oftentimes can mask other forms of power relationships that could be abusive, manipulative and oppressive (Bakar 2004, p. 69)

This draws attention to the importance of a woman's subject position in the performance of womanhood. The voices of female elites were more influential than poor uneducated women. These women in positions of political, economic and spiritual leadership directed the discourse, on womanhood. This, therefore, constituted the basis of the essentialization of an ideal woman and formed the grounds upon which certain behaviours were considered permissible and non-permissible. Largely, access to the empowered space was dependent on a woman's positionality, which in itself was fluid and flexible. In Igboland for instance, motherhood was deified but a wife paradoxically was accorded less respect in Igbo proverbs and folklores (Or were women both 'victims' and 'heroines' as asserted by Ogbomo and Ogbomo (1993, p. 432). In relation to Iyede women of *Isoko* extract in Delta State. There were several sites of knowledge production on what constitutes a real woman. These included women groups, female cults, local governing councils and religion. Through these historical traces of the pre-colonial Nigerian women we can clearly notice the difficulty of any attempt to essentialize women or womanhood. On the

contrary what can be clearly observed is the crisscrossing of roles and multifaceted dimensions of performative actions of women which are clearly contingent upon both internal/external factors such as; social status, economic class, occupation, personal choices and desires, aspirations, family background etc. All these factors describe her position in relation to the performative actions and inactions she takes as a woman.

Conclusion

The role of women in the pro-colonial Nigeria society was defined by their age, kinship ties, and status. Given that womanhood is culturally determined, these performative acts were context-driven. However, what remained evident is that the pre-colonial space was one of negotiation, and renegotiation. Contrary to Western stereotypical labels of voiceless victims, ignorant and impoverished, pre-colonial women were active agents in the economic, religious and in certain cases, political lives of the people. They continuously sought to make meaning of their lives, accommodating, negotiating and challenging societal expectations. The study thus rejects the essentializing of womanhood across different historical epoch though with particular emphasis on women of the pre-colonial era. The paper acknowledges the complexity and diversity of the woman, noting that their positioning in the societal ladder impacted on their role and sense of power/powerlessness in society. Thus the experiences of the Iyalode was at once similar to other women, yet different to those in the lower echelons of society. Members of iban song or abire in the Ibibio/Annang cultural milieu respectively, were at some points powerful and at others subordinate.

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